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ABSTRACT

A study examined how parliamentary procedure may be used in everyday group discussion and how its principles may be applied in committee meetings and discussions that do not demand formal parliamentary procedures. Subjects, 127 undergraduate and 56 graduate students attending two Canadian universities, were surveyed over a 4-year period. Subjects were asked to consider what aspects of parliamentary procedure might be applicable in modified form to everyday small group discussion and were also asked to illustrate their applications. Results indicated that: (1) 75% to 92% of the subjects who voted for the relevancy of motions expressed the view that such parliamentary concerns would be relevant; (2) 9% declared competence in, and 3% declared mastery of, parliamentary procedures; (3) of the 183 respondents, only 71 reported that they ever considered applying parliamentary principles to discussions where parliamentary law did not prevail; (4) of those 71 subjects, 48 reported they had limited success and only 14 reported they deliberately applied parliamentary principles to some degree whenever they discussed matters; and (5) after taking part in the study, 152 said they would consider applying parliamentary ideas in groups free of the requirement of parliamentary law. Numerous examples illustrate how various parliamentary principles could be applied in small group discussion. Findings suggest that the logic of parliamentary law and procedure can be rhetorically modified and adjusted to met the pragmatic needs of the unique circumstance of discussions unobliged to follow parliamentary law. (Two tables of data are included; 14 references are attached.) (RS)

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# Parliamentary Lessons: Applying Parliamentary Principles to Small Group Communication

by
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## ABSTRACT

Parliamentary principles, procedures, rules, and laws have use in group discussions that do not require the formal application of parliamentary theory and practice. Although restricted for the most part to groups requiring parliamentary theory and practice, parliamentary principles can be applied with efficacy to small group communication in general in adapted form. This study reports the results of a survey of 183 students at two Canadian universities. The survey approached the students on the question of systematic applicability of parliamentary procedures to discussion groups generally. The positive and constructive findings are reported and discussed.

With disappointment, we see modern texts on small group communication published without a significant reference to parliamentary procedure. Many find small group communication textbooks published with no mention of parliamentary procedure. Napier and Gershenfeld (1987) cover small group communication with scientific sophistication and rhetorical lucidness. Parliamentary procedure and practice find no relevant place in their otherwise valuable text. The case is similar with small group texts by Cathcart and Samovar (1988), Gouran (1990), and Fisher & Ellis (1990). An insightful textbook by Jensen and Childberg (1991) makes one clear, although brief, allusion to parliamentary procedure. They explain parliamentary procedure as a "familiar decision-making meeting format" that is a "set of rules and roles designed to facilitate decision making in large groups." The authors then note kindly that a "review of the specific rules and role responsibilities of parliamentary procedure is beyond the scope of this chapter" (p. 111).

Sykes (1990, p. 203) sees the subject matter of the social science of speech as the exchange of messages--not the study of "traits, cognitive processes, learning, or group function or structure." Rhetorical studies include "actual speeches given by actual speakers." Speech studies are "almost behavioristic" and should focus on behavioristic features. Instead of emphasizing communication in speech communication, speech scholars should have emphasized speech, focused on messages exchanged rather than on the "personalities of senders or receivers," and stressed the "practical problems of speakers addressing audiences." Fiordo (1988) too has stressed the practical spoken and behavioristic side of the speech communication field designation for similar theoretical and research purposes. The current study of parliamentary procedures and practices moves in the practical and behavioristic direction of spoken communication in groups that do not follow formal parliamentary rules, laws, or principles.

In a chapter entitled "Procedure to Get the Job Done" in a section of this chapter called "Parliamentary Procedure," Hasling (1988, pp. 55-59) presents one of the few limited accounts of parliamentary procedure in the context of group discussion. Although Hasling qualifies the endorsement of parliamentary law in the context of group discussion, he does endorse it for structured groups of 15 or more participants. He even suggests in an incipient form the thrust of this paper when he says that most of the time parliamentary procedure is "used informally, because structure that is excessively rigid can interfere with communication." Parliamentary procedure "maintains order and prevents more than one

person from talking at a time" and "focuses attention on one thing and a time." Parliamentary procedure "leads the discussion to a resolution" and "provides continuity" to the group. Hasling intimates what this paper develops: the idea that parliamentary principles can be used in varying degrees of formality effectively in diverse democratic discussion groups.

My intent is to demonstrate how parliamentary procedure may be used in everyday group discussion and demonstrate how its principles may be applied in committee meetings and discussions that do not demand formal parliamentary procedures. As Murphy (1978) suggested long ago, "parliamentary procedure in a modified form can benefit members in any form of discussion." A professor of speech at the University of Illinois-Urbana and Parliamentarian of the 1970 Illinois Constitutional Convention, Professor Murphy, suggested this direction of parliamentary research before his passing. This paper is a step in his suggested direction. I will cover a selection of parliamentary procedures selected by 127 undergraduates and 56 graduate students (over a 4-year period at two Canadian Universities) as being applicable in a modified form to everyday discussion. The students were asked to illustrate their application.

The functions and principles rather than the technicalities of parliamentary procedure constitute the concern of this paper. The students asked made the following selections. They were asked to consider what aspects of parliamentary procedure might benefit members of a small group discussion that did not require formal parliamentary procedure as a part of its decision making process. The students were asked for each motion whether the following parliamentary conventions should prevail: (1) Can it interrupt a speaker? (2) Is a second required? (3) Can it be amended? (4) Is it debatable? and (5) What type of vote is required? The choice of motions (with brief descriptions) offered them were the following: (1) Division of the question, (2) Withdraw a motion, (3) Suspend a rule, (4) Object to consideration, (5) Point of order, (6) Request for information, (7) Appeal from the decision of the chair (8) Adjourn, (9) Take a recess, (10) Question of rights and privileges, (11) Call for the orders of the day, (12) End debate, (3) Limit or extend limits of debate, (14) Postpone to a definite time, (15) Refer (16) Amend, (17) Main motion (18) Reconsider, and (19) Rescind.

## Conventions and Motions

A table of the results of the first five questions follows (see Table I). The 183 students were required

to declare familiarity with parliamentary procedures. They were not required to have a course in parliamentary procedure or any sophistication with it. Indeed, a small percentage (9%) declared competence and a smaller percentage (3%) declared mastery.

**TABLE I (Relevancy to Non-Parliamentary Discussion)**

| | Interrupt a Speaker | Second Required | Can Be Amended | Debatable | Vote Required |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IRRELEVANT | 147 | 151 | 160 | 168 | 152 |
| RELEVANT | 36 | 32 | 23 | 15 | 31 |

Approximately 25% to 8% of the sample thought the procedures for handling the motions would not be relevant in fact in an informal discussion. The option of being undecided was not allowed.

A table of the results of the motions selected follows (see Table II). The majority (approximately 75% to 92%) who voted for their relevancy expressed the view that, in principle especially but occasionally even in fact, such parliamentary concerns would be relevant.

**TABLE II (Selection of Motions)**

| MOTION | RELEVANT | IRRELEVANT |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Division of the question | 135 | 48 |
| 2. Withdraw a motion | 131 | 52 |
| 3. Suspend a rule | 158 | 25 |
| 4. Object to consideration | 137 | 46 |
| 5. Point of order | 132 | 51 |
| 6. Request for information | 145 | 38 |
| 7. Appeal from the decision of the chair | 114 | 69 |
| 8. Adjourn | 148 | 35 |
| 9. Take a recess | 130 | 53 |
| 10. Question of rights and privileges | 149 | 34 |
| 11. Call for the orders of the day | 98 | 85 |
| 12. End debate | 170 | 13 |
| 13. Limit (or extend limits of) debate | 136 | 47 |
| 14. Postpone to a definite time | 117 | 66 |
| 15. Refer | 109 | 74 |
| 16. Amend | 139 | 44 |
| 17. Main | 172 | 11 |
| 18. Reconsider | 163 | 20 |
| 19. Rescind | 168 | 15 |

Clearly, once again, the perceived relevancy of the parliamentary procedure choice (approximately 60% to 95% of the sample) outweighed the perceived irrelevancy of these procedures. The students saw them as principles worthy of application in a small group discussion and capable of being applied with efficacy.

Recognizably, the data collected for this paper is soft. It is based on limited numbers and perceptions. In a sense, the perceptions may amount to little more than guesses which may be limited again by the imagination, insight, and experience of the students. Nevertheless, our purposes are humble. This is an attempt to explore an area so far suffering from a paucity of studies. The illustrations offered by the respondents follow.

The students were asked to illustrate how the parliamentary principle could be applied in small group discussion. Some responses were more concise and obvious than others. To conserve space, the responses are reported in brief. The student responses have been modified with reference to style, not substance. Responses were rewritten for clarification and conciseness.

Limited space will further limit the number of illustrations. Although asked to illustrate at least one and no more than five applications of formal parliamentary motions to everyday discussion, some motions had twelve or more illustrations. Only one illustration will be used here per item. In honor of Professor Murphy, the motions presented to the students in this study were derived from Murphy's (1943) Parliamentary Procedures which were elaborations and clarifications of Robert's (1915) Robert's Rules of Order. A future study might utilize current texts by Ericson (1991) or Riddick and Butcher (1991).

## Illustrations

Incidental motions will be reported first. In an ordinary discussion, dividing the question of discussion can be translated into asking the group to talk about complex themes in parts. Withdrawing a motion can be treated straightforwardly by the person presenting a plan to the group by telling the group to drop a plan set forth. Suspending a rule can take the form of asking the group to pardon a procedural or social transgression in routine operations in order to transact business. Objecting to the consideration of a motion can translate into a polite request that discussion of a topic that is not germane to the group's business be terminated. A point of order can be transformed into a group member asking the group leader

to observe the way in which another member is processing group business. The request for information can take the form of asking the leader of the group discussion or a member of it to clarify certain facts or figures germane to a claim. The appeal from the decision of the chair can be transformed into a humane attempt to correct an ordinarily competent leader who for unknown causes has decided something in error.

Under privileged motions, in small group discussions that do not formally use parliamentary rules, the motion to adjourn can take the simple form of asking the group members to terminate their meeting for the evening. A motion to recess can be translated into a request to take a break for a few minutes when a group is deadlocked on some point of business. Questions of rights and privileges can be treated as requests to continue a meeting only after the room has been properly cooled (or heated) or only after the noise from a neighboring room has been reduced (or eliminated). To call for the orders of the day can be a request to the leader or the group to get back on topic or to stick to the business it had to resolve.

Under subsidiary motions, in everyday informal discussions, a motion to end debate can be transformed into a request to stop clashing over an issue and decide what action to take since arguing is no longer seen as beneficial. A motion to limit or extend the limits of debate can be translated almost literally into a request to discuss or argue about a controversial matter for another ten minutes or restrict the disputants to two outspoken members who are antagonists on an issue. The motion to postpone consideration to a definite time can be used in small informal groups to allow for tempers to subside on an issue that would be volatile if discussed at a current (rather than a future) meeting when other events may have intervened and other people may be present. A motion to refer is likely to benefit a small informal group when the group has several members who have mastery status or expert standing in some field or on some topic germane to facilitating the interests of the group--for example, computer skills or knowledge of the stock market. The motion to amend can be translated into any reasonable modification of an idea proposed by group members. If an idea is referred to a subgroup of tax experts from the group at large, the thought of limiting the discussion of these experts to half an hour instead of leaving it open might serve as a worthwhile improvement to an already reasonable suggestion.

Main motions are reported as easily applicable to informal group discussions. Any idea or thesis brought before a group or emerging from the group on any subject relevant to the needs of the group constitutes the informal version of a main or principal motion in parliamentary practice. The topic for

discussion emerges only after other matters have been taken care of by the members. To prevent confusion, only one main motion or idea should be dealt with at a time. The main idea discussed can take the form of a proposition, claim, resolution, question, assertion, judgment, evaluation, or other appropriate rhetorical form. It will frequently be amended or modified and debated or discussed. So, if I may interject, a position on the Ground War in Operation Desert Storm or an opinion on state budget cuts debilitating the efficient operation of higher education could serve to initiate a discussion if other relevant communication factors were in order.

As for special motions being applied to group discussions not requiring parliamentary procedures, a couple will be reported. The formal motion to reconsider can be translated almost exactly into a request to reexamine a decision made earlier in the discussion or a conclusion reached in a former discussion. The past decision, if faulty, may be rectified through this principle as translated into common discourse. The motion to rescind can be used in everyday discussion by requesting that a decision made can be undone. Whether the decision applies to the endorsement of a position on a main idea discussed or on a procedural matter, the strategy involved here is to nullify the decision. New information may incite such a stratagem. In daily business discussions, on occasion, when proposed and accepted, the group can learn of its willingness to note its shortcomings and improve them dramatically and intelligently.

One of the surprising findings was that of the 183 participants in this study, only 71 reported that they ever considered applying parliamentary principles to discussions where parliamentary law did not prevail. Of the 70, 48 reported they had tried to apply them with limited success and only 14 reported they deliberately applied the principles of parliamentary procedure to some degree whenever they discussed matters without the requirement of parliamentary law. After taking part in this experimental exercise, 152 said they would consider applying parliamentary ideas in groups free of the requirement of parliamentary law. The remaining 31 reported a range of responses from too difficult to implement to marginally useful.

The rhetorical side of applying parliamentary procedures took the form of verbal camouflage. Instead of using the exact terminology of parliamentary procedure all the time, the strategy was to use synonymous expressions as well as the literal expressions. For example, instead of saying, "I'd like you to reconsider the decision you've just made," a discussant might say, "Please think this over once again." Rather than "I'd like you to suspend a rule," a discussant might say, "Please give me your view a little at a

time so I can analyze them." Similar rhetorical strategies were used and can be used to adapt the parliamentary jargon to the vernacular. In short, the logic of parliamentary law and procedure can be rhetorically modified and adjusted to meet the pragmatic needs of the unique circumstance of discussions unobliged to follow parliamentary law formally and literally.

## Suggestions for Further Study

Some principles of parliamentary procedure have not been pursued in this study and should be in future studies. The following parliamentary concepts and principles should be pursued for additional insight to benefitting informal small group discussion through the application of parliamentary principles: the notion of quorum to establish an adequate number of relevant parties present, a secretary to insure adequate records and historical continuity, committee reports to insure that a group gets feedback from those commissioned to accomplish specified ends, old and new business to insure coverage of events from past to future to maintain a viable operation, the notion of seconding to establish that view proposed exists, the concepts of decorum and indecorum to create an awareness of propriety, rules against improper motions (dilatory, absurd, or frivolous) to insure that business will be transacted instead of obstructed, and numerous other parliamentary principles, procedures, rules, and laws.

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